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Who Were the Killers?

By Maria Laurino

That Sunday, February 21, 1965, when Malcolm X went to address a rally at Harlem's Audubon Ballroom, he knew he would soon die. He had telephoned Alex Haley the day before, his voice shaken, saying that he was looking for a new home for his family since his house had been firebombed the week before. In the preceding months, Malcolm had become violently ill in Cairo and believed that American agents had tried to poison him. His split with the Honorable Elijah Muhammad created a hatred among members of the Nation of Islam who had tried to attack him in Los Angeles and Chicago just weeks before. He was surrounded by hostile forces. Malcolm X entered the Audubon on Sunday afternoon and greeted the crowd with his customary "As-salaam alaikum," when a disturbance erupted in the back of the hall. His attention diverted, Malcolm was killed by a shotgun 15 feet away.

Twenty years later—with three Muslim men serving jail sentences of 25 years to life for killing Malcolm X—many questions raised during the trial have still never been answered. Three schools of thought about his assassination have developed since then. The simplest theory is that the Muslims were solely responsi-

ble for his death. Malcolm knew he had to leave the Nation of Islam after he learned that his revered leader, Elijah Muhammad, had fathered illegitimate children—a violation of Muslim law—and after he had been silenced by Muhammad for a comment he made about JFK's assassination. Some of his fellow Muslims, calling him a traitor, turned against him and wanted him dead.

A second theory put forth is that the CIA played an active role in Malcolm's death. In the months before he was killed, Malcolm had become a major international figure. The CIA and the State Department were following him throughout his travels in Africa, and proponents of this theory argue that the government saw Malcolm X's growing popularity abroad as a clear threat to American interests. And he was organizing to get a resolution adopted at the United Nations condemning the U.S. for human rights violations. On February 9, Malcolm was mysteriously barred by the French government from entering their country. According to this view of the events, while the Muslims may have pulled the trigger, the CIA was behind the murder.

Others who have studied the assassina-

tion argue that the FBI and the New York City police were involved. Clearly, the FBI was following Malcolm—he had tape-recorded conversations with FBI agents who had come to his home. The agents tried to pay off Malcolm in return for the names of the Nation of Islam's members. The Church Commission's Select Committee To Study Government Operations contains references to the FBI tapping his phone. The New York City police's Bureau of Special Services (BOSS) had been investigating Malcolm and they had every reason to know his life was in danger. Yet the police failed to provide adequate protection in the last months of his life.

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